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Indigenous people react during protests against Ecuadorian President Lenin Moreno's austerity measures in Quito, Ecuador, Oct.11, 2019. Ecuadorian observers at the Synod of Bishops for the Amazon at the Vatican are keeping an eye on massive protests that have claimed the lives of at least five people in their country. (CNS/Reuters/Henry Romero)

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Ecuadorian observers at the Synod of Bishops for the Amazon are keeping an eye on massive protests that have claimed the lives of five people in their country.

The demonstrations broke out Oct. 4 after President Lenin Moreno announced suspension of a 40-year-old fuel subsidy as part of a multibillion-dollar loan agreement with the International Monetary Fund.

Ecuador's economy depends heavily on oil exports, but revenues have fallen in recent years because of lower prices on the international market, leaving the country with mounting debt.

Diesel fuel prices more than doubled overnight, and gasoline prices rose by about 30 percent. The sudden increase in transportation costs is expected to increase the costs of other products.

The president declared a state of emergency Oct. 4, moved the government from the capital of Quito to the coastal city of Guayaquil, and imposed a curfew, but protests by transportation workers, young people, unions and indigenous organizations continued.

In a statement issued Oct. 9, Ecuador's bishops called on the those involved "to keep working toward a final agreement that makes possible a return to calm and the strengthening of democracy." They added their prayers "for reaching common ground that returns peace to our nation and for progress in the quest for sustainable justice for life and human dignity."

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Besides anger over fuel prices, the protests reflect frustration that has been bottled up for the past few years, as Ecuadorians have seen successive governments break promises to improve economic conditions, said Capuchin Br. Txarly Azcona, who

works in Puyo, in Ecuador's central Amazon region.

"The International Monetary Fund requires drastic measures that affect poor people, especially indigenous communities," Azcona told Catholic News Service.

Many Ecuadorians lack stable employment, he said, "so when prices go up, how are people supposed to support themselves?"

Cesar Licuy, an indigenous catechist from Sucumbios province, called the lifting of the fuel subsidy unjust.

The move "only benefits those in power. It does not benefit indigenous people," he told CNS.

The Amazon is the source of the country's petroleum, but the region's people receive no recognition from the government, he said after the Oct. 11 morning session of synod discussions.

Licuy said he hoped the synod would result in a call for an end to oil drilling, mining and indiscriminate logging in Ecuador. Stripping the mountains of trees, he said, robs indigenous communities of the water and clean air they need to survive.

Destruction of Amazonian ecosystem has been one of the priority issues at the synod. Ecuador's indigenous organizations are calling for an end to oil drilling, as well as to the large-scale mining that has begun in Ecuador in recent years. Government officials say mining is necessary to increase revenue, especially since the drop in oil prices.

Azcona said he hopes Ecuadorians can build a more equitable country.

"The poorest people are demanding a decent life" and a country that "reflects the dreams and the hopes of all Ecuadorians," he said. "It is the responsibility for all of us to build a country that's inclusive, where the rights and identities of indigenous peoples are respected."

This story appears in the **Synod for the Amazon** feature series. View the full series .